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Innocence Abroad: Jimmy Carter's Four Misconceptions

Tough rhetoric from the President followed the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Yet questions persist

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On January 12, 1977, eight days before his inauguration as President, Jimmy Carter was briefed by Washington's leading military and national-security experts. Carter asked if studies had been made on how a major reduction of long-range missiles would affect the U.S.-Soviet military balance.

Gen. George Brown, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, quickly responded, "Oh, yes, Governor." He referred to studies that analyzed a reduction of long-range missiles from the proposed SALT II level of about 2400 to perhaps 2000 or so. This was considered a radical cutback. "I'm not talking about 2000, General," Carter replied in his soft Georgia accent. "I'm talking about 200 or 300."

Silence followed. Finally Harold Brown, Carter's incoming Secretary of Defense, pointed out that such an immense reduction in America's strategic arsenal would pose a fundamental risk to the nation's security, all but destroying the U.S. nuclear "shield." It would also expose Europe to the Soviet Union's vast superiority in conventional arms.

Carter's pre-inaugural interest in radically reducing the U.S. arsenal set a pattern that persisted until the Soviet military takeover of Afghanistan last December. It was born of a peculiar innocence, coupled with genuine self-confidence. His experience as a junior Naval officer, Carter felt, established his military expertise; in the two years after his single term as governor of Georgia, his membership on the newly formed Trilateral Commission convinced him that his agile mind had mastered the great game of diplomacy.

Others were not so sure. The trouble with Carter, Henry Kissinger told a friend early in the Carter Administration, was not that he did not understand foreign affairs, but that he did not understand that he did not understand.

Jimmy Carter is by no means the solitary author of the present weakened state of U.S. foreign policy. Toward the end of the Vietnam war and in the years that followed, Democratic Congresses began slashing away at the defense budget. Republican Presidents timidly accepted this. Nevertheless, our increasing vulnerability derives very substantially from the steady reinforcement of four basic misconceptions that Carter carried into office with him:

Misconception No. 1: The Cold War is over. The pronouncement was made four months after the inauguration in Carter's commencement address at Notre Dame University: "Confident of our own future, we are now free of *that inordinate fear of communism,* which once led us to embrace any dictator who joined us in our fear."

In giving voice to this innocence he was merely endorsing the then popular sentiment that ideological conflict between democratic America and totalitarian Russia was no longer relevant. That view prevailed among such foreign-policy advisers as Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, chief disarmament negotiator Paul Warnke and Marshall Shulman, Vance's resident Soviet expert.

The only dissenter within the Administration was National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, who harbored no illusions about the Cold War being ended. But he was surrounded by adversaries, and he lacked both bureaucratic skill and Oval Office backing. Brzezinski did not even control the critical function of naming his own National Security Council staff.

Meanwhile, Carter was developing a peculiar empathy for Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev. He seemed to view Brezhnev as a fellow politician harassed by pressure groups, rather than as the master of Russia who had sent his legions rolling into Czechoslovakia a decade earlier.

Nor was he prepared to dwell on Soviet violations of détente. When a military junta seized power in Afghanistan in April 1978, one of the President's national-security aides handed a reporter highly confidential information about close ties between the Soviet Union and the leaders of the junta. It proved that rivers of blood had flowed in their seizure of power. The reporter's question was obvious: "Why doesn't the State Department publicly reveal these facts?" "Because," the bureaucrat replied with bitter sarcasm, "it is afraid the Soviets might not accept our next concession."

Those "concessions" were being made in the SALT negotiations. Nobody pretended that this was an equitable step toward arms control, but key Carter aides insisted that the "process" must be maintained. "I would like to say to you," Carter told a joint session of Congress on June 18, 1979, following the signing of SALT II, "that President Brezhnev and I developed a better sense of each other as leaders and as men. . . . I believe that together we laid a foundation on which we can build a more stable relationship between our two countries."

The Soviet sweep into Afghanistan was only six months away.

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